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ABSTRACT

This article supports the view that it is not only possible but also essential that literature be taught in elementary schools, arguing that literature belongs at the center of a school's language arts curriculum. The question of how literature may be taught and learned is discussed, and explicit suggestions for its study are delineated. Specific instructional methods include questioning techniques, using examples of figurative language as models for student writing, developing student awareness of literature's continuity by comparing the old (biblical and classical mythology) with the new (contemporary short stories and comics), and discussing methods, techniques, and themes in storytelling. References to works of children's literature are included. (RL)

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CAN LITERATURE BE TAUGHT?

It is impossible to teach or learn literature, just as it is impossible to teach food or learn nature. We experience food and nature; when we teach and learn about them, we call those studies nutrition and physics. So it is with literature. We can experience stories, poems and plays, but we cannot directly teach or learn a work of art. When we speak of teaching literature, we mean teaching and learning what literature is and how it works, knowledge that can be imparted and learned by degrees from kindergarten through graduate school.

Not only is it possible to teach what literature is and how it works, it is essential, for literary study involves education of the imagination. Imaginative literature is the product of the mind's freest flights of fancy. The story writer creates worlds where anything is possible: rabbits talk and carpets fly, good triumphs over evil, the tyranny of time and even death itself is conquered. The dreams and nightmares we can't express are expressed for us in just the right words. The poet tells us the "fog comes on little cat feet" and we say: "That's exactly right!" Or he reminds us to "Hold fast to dreams/ For when dreams go/ Life is a barren field/ Frozen with snow," and we say, "That's true, but I never thought of it in just that way."

Through stories and poems we learn that there are no limits to the human imagination, a lesson that has the potential to change our lives.

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Nothing is more important for creating a truly human and humane world than realizing the power of imagination. Indeed, William Blake said that nothing is real beyond the imaginative patterns we make of reality Certainly, in the real world there can be no change or reform of any kind unless we first use imagination to describe the sort of world we want to build, the kind of lives we want to lead.

Literature is the journal of man's quest for his human identity. It has everthing to do with people, young or old -- their actions, their needs and desires. Great stories and poems do not shrink from showing us both sides of the coin: What it is to be human and what it means to be inhumane. Inside a story we can walk for a time wearing someone else's shoes, seeing as he saw or feeling as she felt. We can travel to faraway places; we can live for a time in the past or the future. In imaginative literature are created new worlds--of possibilities and choices--that put us in touch with our own imaginative worlds.

How can we awaken and educate the imagination through literature? How can we teach what literature is and how it works, especially to young children? Is it enough to expose them to fine poems and powerful stories even if we have to read aloud to those who can't read for themselves? No, it is not enough, but it is a way to begin because the study of literature, of any art, begins in experiencing it with pleasure.

Should we try to teach through vivesection and analysis, asking our pupils to translate stories and poems into factual discourse in an effort to get at their meaning? Of course we should not, since this is an exer-

cise in futility. The truth of literature is imaginative truth, independent of the world of empirical data and logical proofs. It gives us truth through comparison and association--in the language of simile and metaphor--where quite unlike things are said to be like each other, even to be each other.

Should we single out this poem or that story and use their content to teach morals and ethics? Shall we choose literary works to enrich understandings in science and social studies? Should we give children literature chosen for its psychotherapeutic potential? We can do all these things and literature, if it is any good at all, will not fail us. Even without our probing and preaching, fine stories will bring to readers and listeners insights biographical, historical, psychological, ethical, even factual.

Yet all this is not enough. Exposure to literature, analysis of it, extracting Timeless Truths and Moral Messages from it, is not teaching what literature is and how it works. Teachers are in the business of education and education worth anything at all presupposes a sense of direction and a goal. If learning is to take, it must be deductive, not all telling and howing, but exploration and discovery. If learning is to take, it must not be piecemeal and haphazard. Good teaching involves helping students to transform content into structure, to see patterns in facts.

To begin, we must give literature a place of its own in the elementary curriculum. When we hear talk of the language arts, most of it

concerns reading, writing, speaking and listening. We are obsessed with the teaching of so-called skills: word attack skills, spelling skills, composition skills, even communication skills. All these must be mastered, we hear, before students can even begin to grasp the lofty language of literature. Surely something is wrong with that logic. For in literature is to be found the art of our language at its finest. Literature is the language art. It is wrong to postpone the study of it, to make of it something remote and élite. The teaching of reading, for instance, must begin with it. Literature nourishes the child's imagination and develops the desire to read. Moreover, it is only the art of literature that can win the child away from the exciting cops and robbers stories on television to read a book. If he is to spend time with print at all, it must be as satisfying to the child as television. Where will many children learn about books if we don't introduce them in school? With children 'feeling' comes first. We must show them that books as well as the box can make them laugh or cry, shiver and gasp.

In finely-crafted stories and poems our language is used with greatest power and intensity. At its best it is rhythmic, disciplined, carrying meaning through expert timing of the swing and fall of candences. Its vocabulary is controlled only in the sense that it is apt and precise. Unless our children are exposed to quantities of fine writing, their own will be as dull and graceless as that in those infamous chronicles of Dick and Jane.

Literature belongs at the center of the language arts curriculum,

not on its periphery. From the earliest age and through the elementary and junior high school years, children should be read to regularly, taking in literature by the ear as well as the eye. They will never discover by themselves the varied wonders of literature by gazing at the spines of books in the library. The finest poems and stories of all kinds and times must be introduced and shared. And there must be time for talking about them and responding to them.

Literature is an art. Poems and stories are imaginative verbal structures. They are not primarily concerned with the informational and the factual. When we study literature we should expect and encourage a response to it through art. If a child can work out a dramatization of the key scenes of a story he has read, he is aware of that story's structure. If he is able to make a picture of a character or a scene from a book, he has been able to visualize. If he can write a new episode for a character he has met in a story, or create a poem in the same form as one he has read, he shows that he has absorbed the details that make up the character or internalized the form of the poem.

Talking about literature and responding to it through another art form are both effective ways to learn what literature is and how it works. But the talk must be good talk, and it must center in the literature itself. Learning why Mary liked or disliked STUART LITTLE, hearing how Peter had an experience similar to an escapade of Henry Huggins' may be interesting, but it doesn't add up to knowledge of how literature works.

Talk instead about the content of each separate story and poem, and

how each is put together. Ask literary questions rather than factual ones. It is inappropriate to test whether a child has understood a story or poem by asking a series of questions that treat them as though they were informational writing. There are many ways to understand a story or poem and they are not by any means all translatable into descriptive prose. That is why book reports don't work and children hate them. They know how impossible it is to express the magic of CHARLOTTE'S WEB in a couple of paragraphs of facts. Expect the children to ask questions of their own and ask them questions that lead to an understanding of how literature works:

--Did the story end as you expected it to? Did the author prepare you to expect the ending? How?

--Suppose we thought of a different ending for the story. How would the rest of the story have to be changed for the new ending?

--What does the author do to get the story going? Suppose that opening were changed or removed, how would the rest of the story be changed?

--What kind of person was the principal character? Did he apparently change during the course of the story? How? What caused him to change?

--Suppose this or that character were removed from the story. How would the whole be changed?

--Suppose the order of events were changed. What would happen to the story? Would it be a new story or no story at all?

--Where does the story take place? If it took place somewhere else or in a different time, how would it be changed?

--What does the author do to create suspense, to make you want to read on to find out what happens?

--Every story writer creates a make-believe world and peoples it with characters. Even where the world is far different from your own (as in fantasy), how does the author make his story seem possible and probable?

--What signs and signals indicate that a story will be fanciful rather than realistic? Funny rather than serious?

--In what ways is this story and its characters like others you have read, heard, or seen?

Asking literary questions is a step in the direction toward learning what literature is and how it works. Now go a step further. Help the children to see the structural principles that underlie all the stories and poems they may read and hear. Relate the more formal literary experiences of the school to the child's total verbal experience, the subliterary world of television serials and commercials, advertisements, films and pop songs.

We soon discover that children intuitively know many of these principles, but they don't know what they know. It is our job to make them aware, to hear them say: "That's right! -- I knew that all along."

Take, for example, this structural principle: The literary imagination seeks to suggest an identity between the human mind and the world outside it. The language of literature is associative, using figures of speech like similes and metaphors to suggest this identity. In their own poetry children make use of this principle naturally, unconsciously, as some examples of their poems, found in Richard Lewis's MIRACLES, illustraates. An eleven-year-old writes that "The sunset bloomed like sunny balloons on holiday streets." A nine-year-old says that "The

pattering rain dances like a lovely maiden waltzing in the wind...." "Hours are leaves of life/ and I am their gardener.../ Each hour falls down slow," -- another tells us. There is no place in literary study for memorizing definitions for similes and metaphors, and no need. Children will readily see how the poet, through imagery, makes concrete a fleeting experience or feeling. They talk his language, even in their everyday speech.

A second principle has to do with the continuity of literature, for all stories and poems are members of a single family that can trace its lineage back to earliest times. Literature develops out of a center in mythology and began with man's primitive efforts to identify himself imaginatively with animals, plants and the forces of nature. The cycles of nature, everywhere apparent and consistent (sunrise, moonrise, the turning of the seasons, births and deaths and more births) provided a pattern of repetition for stories of man's entire life -- his quest for identity. The adventures, death, disappearance and resurrection of the quester became the basis for our four basic generic plots: romance, tragedy, irony-satire, and comedy. They all show aspects of the quest, man's eternal story of his search for identity.

Because literature has its roots in mythology, it is essential that a literary education include stories of Biblical and Classical mythology. Here we find the central myth of the hero with god-like powers whose mysterious births, triumph, death and eventual rebirth follow the rhythm of the sun and seasons. Hercules and his twelve labors, Perseus

with the head of Medusa, Theseus emerging from the labyrinth, all show clearly the quest myth that underlies all of literature. Now in stories the gods are gone, the hero resembles ourselves, but in modern stories like Anne Holm's NORTH TO FREEDOM and Julia Cunningham's DORP DEAD, the shape of the myth can still be seen if we look for it.

Listening to the old tales and reading them is basic training in the education of the imagination. Perhaps there will be a fourth grader who is surreptitiously reading Superman's adventures from a smuggled comic book as you tell the story of Hercules. Invite him to share his story with the class. They will see that these stories of superheroes from two different times are the same; only the setting, props and costumes are changed. Help children to make connections between the old and the new. When they realize that literature is more than a collection of isolated stories and poems, when they realize that literary principles reach into the books they read out of school, children will begin to sense something of literature's significance in their lives.

If we trace literature from its beginnings, we see that it is a series of displacements from myth to contemporary realism. And as we move down from myth we see how the quester's powers of action are altered: In myth he is a superhuman hero like St. George doing battle with dragons; in romance and tragedy his powers are those of people larger than real life: he might be a king like Arthur, or an apparently invincible daredevil like James Bond; in comedy his powers are much the same as ours: plucky characters struggle against all odds to make

things end the way our imaginations tell us they ought to. Folk tales are filled with such people. In irony, the world of the helpless anti-hero, his powers are less than our own.

A student does not have to be in graduate school before he can discover a basic literary principle: There are a limited number of ways to tell a story. Some stories turn up at the end, like the mouth of the comic mask and some turn down like the mouth of tragedy. Some are "realistic" or seem to be, while others are set in faraway worlds utterly unlike our own. The content of each story may be different, but one can see patterns in stories, if one has experienced enough of them. Definite shapes emerge. One of the most common story shapes is that of the romance or quest, where a restive character like William Steig's Dominic sets out along a springtime road to fine adventure, fame, treasure or love. Invariably he or she is confronted with a series of problems, hurdles or handicaps that must be successfully overcome, before he gains the object of his quest. In CALL IT COURAGE, Mafatu--against great odds--triumphs over his adversary, the sea. Peter Rabbit at last outwits Mr. McGregor and comes safely home, a hero. Max goes to meet the Wild Things where they live, tames them,and sails home to supper. The tales of Jason and Perseus and Hercules all share this quest form, as does the western where the good guy rides off to right a wrong.

In most realistic stories today the quest involves a psychological rather than an actual journey. In Jill Paton Walsh's UNLEAVING Madge comes through her experiences to a more mature understanding of life and

love. So does Stella in Sue Ellen Bridger's HOME BEFORE DARK. Then there are ironic stories, romance turned inside out, where anti-heroes fail or come to bitter understandings as in Paul Zindel's THE PIGMAN where John deplores life "in a world where you can grow old and be alone and have to get down on your hands and knees and beg for friends."

There are other patterns to be found in literature. The same types of characters are used again and again in different times and in different dress. The evil goddess of the myth is related to the witch of the romance, to the evil stepmother in the fairy tale, and to the impossible female parent in a number of modern ironic stories for children. Themes recur, as in stories where a character agrees - for a price - to give the villain the first thing he meets on his return home. "The King of the Golden Mountain," "The Singing, Soaring Lark" and the old testament story of Jephthah's daughter all share this theme.

Inherent in the quest myth is an imaginative structure that we find in all literature, both stories and poems. Man's quest is cyclical--beginning, developing, ending, beginning again--but it has another aspect. The imagination projects an idealized world above the world of experience, a world where wishes are granted and dreams come true. At the opposite end of the scale is a world of nightmare, horror and chaos. Some call these worlds heaven and hell. Whatever we may call them, we constantly use -- in songs, advertisements, stories and poems -- images that suggest them. We sing: "Sometimes I'm up, sometimes I'm down" or "Down in the valley, the valley so low." We sing of climbing the

highest mountain and building stairways to the stars.

In literary imagery certain seasons of the year and times of day are characteristically related to happiness, youth and beginnings while others are related to sorrow, old age and endings. Advertisements for cigarettes show their product being used in a green and golden paradise. Commercials for cola picture happy drinkers in a place where it is forever summer and they are always young. In Jaap ter Haar's BORIS we can feel the cold of the Russian winter in our bones when Boris is most helpless and desolate. The Ugly Duckling learns his true identity in springtime. When the Norse god, Balder, lies dead in Asgard, darkness spreads over heaven and earth. In Robert Frost's "Stopping by Wood on a Snowy Evening," the temptation to give up is associated with winter and the darkest evening of the year. In more westerns than we can count, the hero rides off into the sunset, not to die but to be reborn in yet another episode of his endless story.

Patterns of imagery are recurrent in poem and story. Animals, birds, natural settings and phenomena of nature are associated by the imagination with man's hopes, dreams and desires or with what he rejects as undesirable. The dove and lamb are part of the heavenly world of peace and love. Serpents, ravens--all beasts and birds of prey--belong to the dark world below. Biblical heroes in their time of testing and sorrow wander in desert wastelands: Orpheus descends into Hades itself. Harsh bleak settings show by contrast that the green landscape is the ideal, part of our vision of Eden or Paradise. The city of glass and concrete

is often, in contemporary stories, symbolic of alienation and despair as it is in Mary Weik's THE JAZZMAN and Paula Fox's HOW MANY MILES TO BABYLON? Journeys and quests are likely to begin in the 'merry months' of May and June. Endings and failures are often associated with the death of the year: fall and winter. When the hero reaches his full powers, his time of triumph is related to the spring or summer. In Constance Greene's BEAT THE TURTLE DRUM, Joss and her family reach great heights of happiness in golden summer days. Joss falls to her death and her family's sorrow is greatest in the fall of that year.

The discussion of the principles of literature is not exhaustive, but it serves to illustrate what is involved in discovering what literature is and how it works. It involves looking into literature and what is less than literature for the patterns to be found there: The recurrent themes and imagery, the conventional plots and characters, the echoes of the old in the new.

Children enjoy puzzles, enjoy fitting together pieces to make a whole. That is exactly what they are doing when, through discussion, they discover how literature works, how it is put together.

What is to be gained from this study? The kind of insight that comes from viewing a globe of the earth rather than looking at portions of it on flat maps. There is perspective to be gained and a sense of the interrelatedness and significance of language art, the art created by imagination out of words.

"Only connect!" urges P. L. Travers in a collection of literary

essays with that title. The study of literature leads to making connections among the works themselves and from them to our own lives. We learn to make imaginative connections, the most valuable kind, insists Travers, creator of MARY POPPINS. One thing is sure: Learning to make connections is what education is about.